

DANIEL GOODWIN

Galen

The time in Rome, when I was young
 and making a name for myself
 was educational and thrilling—
 physician to Marcus Aurelius' son,
 making the rounds of patients and high society—
 but the pull of Pergamum
 was not something I could resist.
 It's there that I became what I am,
 learned at my father's knee
 medicine and philosophy,
 the four schools like the four humours
 of the mind, that mind and body are
 indivisible as our Empire;
 took in the teaching of the high priest
 at the temple of Asclepius,
 watched as great men traveled
 to the god of healing, humbled in their misery,
 for whatever ailed them—
 war wounds, fevers, mysterious pains that lingered
 for no apparent reason—
 the whispers behind the marble pillars,
 surgeries like so many hushed prayers,
 how even the loudest and most callous
 became children.
 The troop of gladiators kept by this physician
 who fought for the pleasure of the crowd,
 spared or not by the crowd's mercy,
 lent their bodies
 to a different sort of sculptor,
 were stoic in their fear and pain

as the swords and daggers
opened up their bodies to the Roman sun.
I could watch the blood run for hours
onto the white sand, soaking in
the roar of the crowd's bloodlust,
watch the red blood spurting,
the torn muscles; and afterwards
amidst their quiet groans
my steel tools, as precise as their own
put in the service of Asclepius
to sew up these rents in the order of the world;
how some begged to be free,
the many times I was ready to betray my oath,
an innocent Sisyphus or Penelope
weaving by night what was unraveled in the day.
From them I learned how the blood flows,
to endure and observe the truth
in how flesh reacts to steel,
the meat beneath the skin
and the power of the mind—
how some lived when they shouldn't have.
And at night, when the sounds
of men grunting and crying receded
before the professional pride in a day's work,
as I fell asleep I would begin to dream
of the other world—not that of the Christians
who speak softly and with conviction
and slowly suck the lifeblood
of the Empire like a leech—
but of the other world beyond this shadowy one
and the gods who hurt and heal us.
And I would try in my way
to bring our bodies a little closer to that perfection
I knew in Pergamum as a boy.